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ABSTRACT

Seven principles of higher education leadership may offer state college systems solutions for responding to external pressures to reform and internal pressures to satisfy faculty demands. External pressures on colleges and universities include erosion of the economic base for higher education, increasing public expectations, and criticism of the status quo. Internal constraints include perennial opposition to change, faculty unions, and resistance from some alumni and political supporters. Faced with these conflicting pressures a pragmatic, realistic view is called for. An examination of states which have restructured or merged institutions and systems in response to fiscal crisis yields seven principles for improving the relationship between campuses and their system offices: (1) let presidents lead; (2) work on big picture goals like increased access and quality at the system level and decentralize other decision making to the campus level; (3) reward achievement with increased financial support; (4) sacrifice uniformity for quality and distinctiveness; (5) favor advocacy over oversight (except in finance); (6) outplace central office functions; and (7) let the facts speak for themselves (publicize positive achievements of the state's colleges and universities). (JB)

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Improving System-Campus Relationships: Seven Principles

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Introduction

The plight of leaders in higher education today is like that of Odysseus (Ulysses to the Romans and the Irish). No, I am not thinking of his blissful sojourn with Circe or Calypso. The episode I have in mind comes toward the end of the voyage when our hero has to navigate his ship between Scylla, the six-headed monster, and Charybdis, the vortex that sucks in and then belches forth the sea three times a day. Those with a classical education will remember that Circe had advised Odysseus to steer close to the monster, where he was sure to lose six men rather then to Charybdis where it was likely that his whole ship would be destroyed. A discrete if not a candid leader, Odysseus didn't tell his men about these dangers as they rode toward them. Charybdis did haul off six of his finest sailors but the rest made it through.

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In the lexicon of Minnesota, education leaders today are between a rock and a hard place.

On the one hand we face the strident but often responsible demands for reform from governors, legislative leaders, policy makers, and such noble organizations as the Education Commission of the States. Right-size, down-size, get more productive, they chant. Better to lose a few than to sink the whole enterprise. At the same time, one of our most important internal constituent groups, the faculty, demand that we advocate for a way of life, a workload, and a series of perks which seem very generous to the larger public. The demands for reform clash with cries to preserve a treasured way of life in an environment with eroding financial and political support. Circe might today advise that it is better to satisfy the demands of external critics than to take on the faculty.

In the next few minutes I would hope to summarize in slightly more detail the external pressures as well as the internal constraints. Then I will suggest seven principles which will, I believe, help preserve captain and crew as they navigate these troubled seas.

External Pressures

The external pressures include erosion of the economic base for higher education, increasing public expectations and criticism of the status quo, and a bevy of reformers, most outside of higher education,

who have little practical experience in changing complex institutions. It is no news to anybody in this room that for ninety percent of the states in this country funding for higher education has not kept pace with rising costs or enrollment. Most of us, however, are seduced by the hope that a quickening economy will close the gap between need and finances.

David Breneman, one of the most thoughtful commentators on the contemporary higher education scene, dashes those hopes. He argues that we are entering a "fundamentally new era, sharply different from the breath-taking growth in enrollment and resources that typified the last four decades".[1] While many would agree with Breneman's Cassandra-like predictions, few have found a successful way to act upon them. One source of funds for public institutions, theoretically at least, is to increase tuition and cycle those increased revenues into financial aid in order to maintain access. Breneman, among others, proposes this solution but he himself scarcely believes that it will become politically acceptable on a broad scale.

Higher education suffers no shortage of literate critics. But now the public at large is getting in on the act. According to a number of polls recently summarized in one of those very helpful PEW Policy papers, seventy-three percent of respondents in California think that getting a college education will be more difficult in the future; sixty-one percent think state mismanagement is a major reason why fees have gone up at public colleges and universities; and sixty-four percent -- two-thirds -- want a fundamental overhaul of the

system.[2] National polls by Lou Harris and others would lead us to substantially the same conclusion. Many Americans, and not just politicians and businessmen, see the academy as, in the words of The Wall Street Journal, the home of a "new leisure class."

While there is no shortage of critics, we also are generously supplied with merchants of hope, various reformers vending sure fire panaceas for reform. Speaking with the exuberance of those untainted by practical experience, evangelists of total quality prefer step by step solutions to nirvana. We have starry-eyed reformers who want to reinvent higher education just as they believe they have reinvented politics at the municipal level. But some of the most experienced among these reformers, such as Michael Hammer of re-engineering fame, will admit that fifty percent or more attempts at reform fail.

Internal Constraints

Balanced off against the pressures for change, we have the perennial human opposition to it. We can repeal bad laws, but not human nature. Machiavelli's comment that "there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things" was as true in sixteenth century Florence as in twentieth century America.

Higher education has institutional characteristics which make it especially resistant to change. Those of us in the public sector can

frequently point to the power of faculty unions. But I should hasten to add that institutions without unions and especially those in the private sector seem to be a little better off. I don't observe much re-engineering at the vast run of private liberal arts colleges in the country. While our colleagues resist change, alumni and political supporters aid and abet that inclination. For example, in financially strapped systems of higher education there are always champions for campus closings so long as it is someone else's campus.

So, practically speaking, what can be done this side of a barrel of a gun. Actually quite a bit can be done if we take a pragmatic, realistic view of what is possible in the bureaucracies we are asked to lead and in which we work. As James Q. Wilson observes, "public management is not an arena in which to find big answers; it is a world of settled institutions designed to allow imperfect people to use flawed procedures" to address perennial problems.

Some work being conducted by myself and several colleagues, including Aims McGuinness, for a book to be published by Jossey-Bass in 1995 points to some principles which help to insure successful change. Our focus is those states which have restructured or merged institutions and systems of institutions in response to fiscal crisis. Very early analysis of these efforts point to seven imperfect principles as a start, at least, on hov the relationship between campuses and their system offices can be improved.

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The principles are:

1. Let presidents lead.
2. Big picture goals only at the system level.
3. Reward achievement with cash.
4. Sacrifice uniformity for quality and distinctiveness.
5. Favor advocacy over oversight (except in finance).
6. Outplace central office functions.
7. Let the facts speak for themselves.

I will say a word or two about each of these.

1. Let presidents lead.

Boards, chancellors, legislators, the public in general have a right to insist on vision and a mission focus, on high principle and personal integrity from their presidential leaders. To be successful these same leaders need to have the pragmatic political skill and low animal cunning of a street corner ward healer. The president of a university as much as a president of the United States is a politician. Both must be able to use constituent and interest group politics as a way of achieving their agenda. But a major responsibility of boards and chancellors is to get out of their way, to not turn presidents into the educational equivalent of managers of fast food restaurants.

2. Big picture goals only at the system level.

I believe that the systems should focus only on the most important educational and social agenda items facing our society. These would include striving toward higher levels of quality; increasing the participation by the disenfranchised, the poor, and minorities; and careful stewardships of the public's resources. Beyond that responsibility, decisions should be decentralized to the campus level.

3. Reward achievement with cash.

Human motivation is a complex subject but one thing we do know is that people in a capitalist society, increasingly in any society, respond quickly and positively to cash rewards. Providing financial support to the institutions for achieving some of the big picture goals mentioned above simply makes sense. Ironically, it has been my experience that a little money provided to faculty in particular can make a lot of difference. Providing modest financial incentives to one institution or to one group will help avoid the danger of seriously reducing resources for those still struggling to improve.

4. Sacrifice uniformity for quality and distinctiveness.

By and large our colleges and universities become more powerful and important as they become more different from one from another. Certainly in such areas as the academic schedule, admissions standards, and -- within limits --tuition there ought to be a great deal of autonomy. But further, campuses ought to be encouraged to define and pursue a unique character or mission or set of specialities. I realize there is a danger in this in that the state universities may seek to emulate the land grants and the community colleges may imitate the state universities but these appetites can be curbed.

5. Favor advocacy over oversight (except finances).

It is the system office responsibility to be a champion, a cheerleader, and an advocate to the universities it represents. It must work to educate the public, boards, and legislators on the importance of having relatively autonomous universities with distinctive strengths. Having said that, in order to maintain the credibility of higher education, the one area where not a little intrusiveness is necessary is in the area of financial oversight. A strong audit function backed up by cold-eyed administrative resolve is essential to successful system leadership.

6. Outplace central office functions.

The most essential financial oversight responsibilities aside, most other administrative functions, in my opinion, ought to be outplaced to lead institutions which have the capacity and desire to provide the service. Thus, as is practiced in North Dakota and elsewhere, one campus may take the lead in distance education, another in administrative computing, and so on. Generally, this approach is more cost effective than the centralized system. Beyond that, the more administrative services are located centrally, the more campuses will look to the system, rather than themselves, for leadership in other areas as well.

7. Let the facts speak for themselves.

It should be the role of the system office to publicize vigorously the positive achievements of the colleges and universities. Failures and examples of poor performance should be used privately to leverage change and improvement.

Will following these principles guarantee more effective administration and positive change? Of course not. Administrative leadership remains more of an art than a science. Still these ideas offer a reasonable hope for better practice.

Whether we need systems or not is not the issue. Even allowing for the initiatives of Governor Christine Todd Whitman in New Jersey and similar interests by some in this state, system administrations will be the dominant form of administration in America for years to come. I do think that that relationship can be enlivened and improved through commitment to principles like these seven.

NOTES

1. David Breneman, "Higher Education: On a Collision Course with New Realities, paper, p. 6.

2. PEW Policy Perspectives, November 1993, Volume 5, Number 2, p. 6B.

3. James Q. Wilson, Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It. New York: Banc Books, 1989, p. 375.